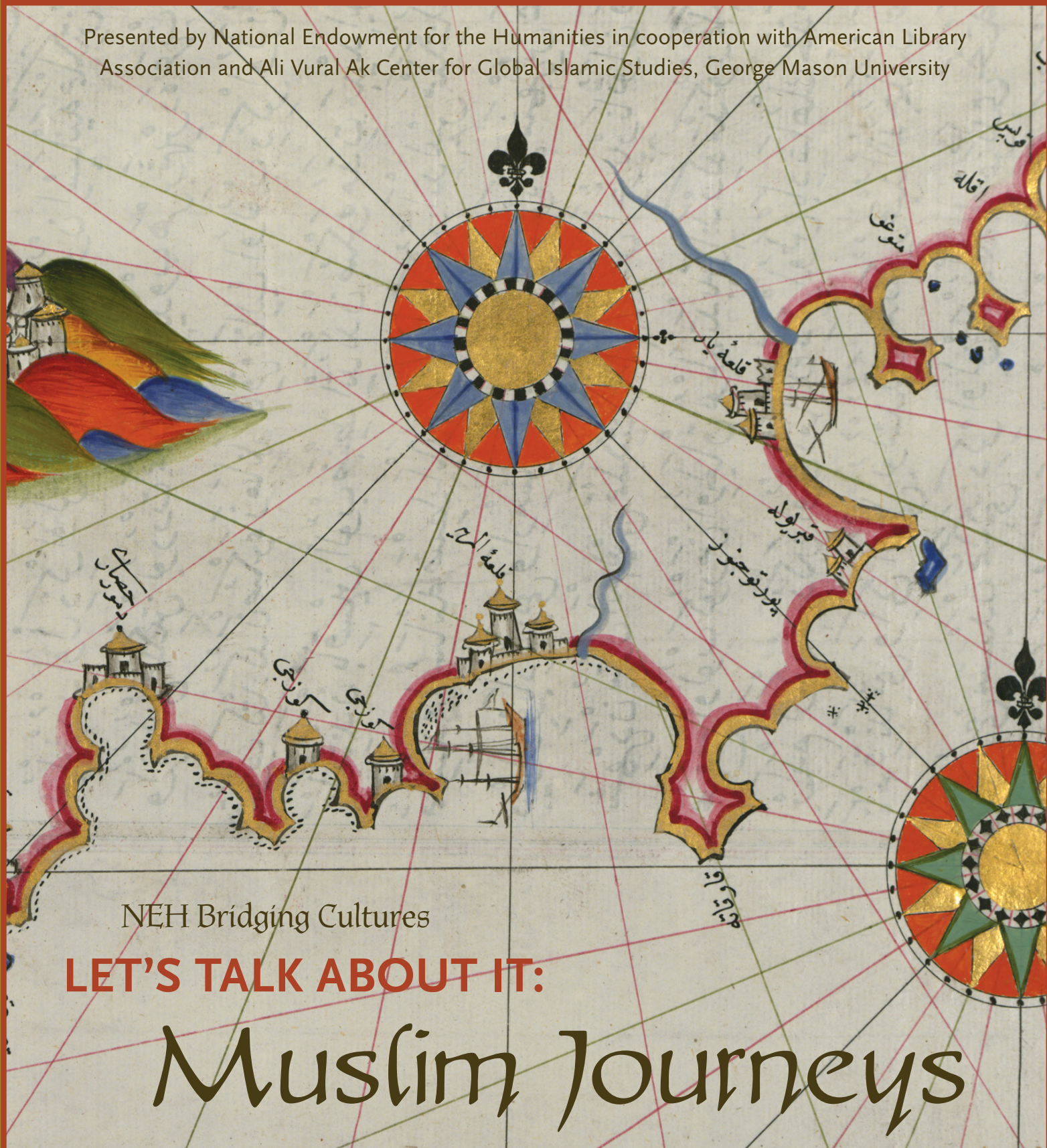


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NEH Bridging Cultures

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT:

Muslim Journeys



Points of View

Deborah Amos • National Public Radio

Points of View

by Deborah Amos



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In a 2011 survey of Muslim Americans conducted by the Pew Research Center, respondents cited negative views about Muslims as the single greatest challenge facing their community. This is hardly an unfamiliar finding. Many other immigrant communities have expressed similar grievances as they integrated into mainstream America and shed an “Old World” culture. But Muslim Americans are not from just one ethnic group or just one “Old World.” They are, rather, part of a vibrant community and culture comprising the 1.5 billion people worldwide who call themselves Muslims.

The five titles gathered under the heading of “Points of View” on the Muslim Journeys Bookshelf offer a corrective to some of the misunderstandings that confront the Muslim community in America. These books, both novels and memoirs, open doors to the experiences of adults and children living in

Muslim-majority societies. The novels and memoirs presented demonstrate the rich diversity of experience, the variety of Muslim opinions, and confirm our shared values. The books do not represent the full spectrum of dialog in these societies, nor offer a definitive portrait of Islamic culture. That would be impossible. Rather, they reveal the universally human rhythms of everyday life in societies typically presented to us only through news headlines about war, turmoil, and unrest.

In the Arab Islamic world, the literary tradition has its deepest roots in poetry. But substantive additions to the canon are now being made in the genre of the novel, as the Points of View selections *In the Country of Men* and *Broken Verses* show. The graphic novel, a fairly new genre even to Western readers, is represented here by *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*. In the memoirs *House of Stone* and *Dreams of Trespass*,



two writers, one a Lebanese American Christian and the other a Moroccan Muslim, use family history to show that the changes that have swept the Muslim world in the last 125 years are not only political but personal. These journeys, struggles, and successes are universal to compelling storytelling, which is an integral part of a culture that reveres the word as part of its Islamic tradition. These titles also provide readers with an opportunity to engage more deeply and understand unseen dimensions of recent, dramatic events such as the Arab Spring and ongoing tensions in South Asia.

In the Country of Men

By Hisham Matar

Nominated in 2006 for the prestigious Man Booker Prize, *In the Country of Men* is a coming-of-age story set in Tripoli, the Libyan capital. Events both grand and small are seen through the eyes of a nine-year-old boy, Suleiman. It is 1969, and in the wider world a young army officer, Muammar al-Qaddafi, has just seized power in a revolution that toppled the Libyan monarchy and began an era of brutal dictatorship. Suleiman's father is a businessman and provides the family a good life despite his frequent absences. His mother is struck by bouts of melancholy when her husband is away. She turns to illicit alcohol for comfort. She turns to her son for solace.

Suleiman is an only child, a rarity in Libya's conservative Muslim culture. He understands the message his status sends about his family: "Parents with only one offspring were always at risk of leading people to believe that either the woman was no longer good, or, God forbid, both the mother and the father were objecting to God's will."

The novel is filled with subtle references to Islam as part of everyday life. Suleiman's refuge is the roof of his parents' house. There, he sometimes thinks about Mustafa, a blind teacher of the Qur'an who warned him about the allure of evil and "the Bridge to Paradise, the bridge

that crosses Hell Eternal to deliver the faithful to Paradise. We all will have to cross it someday, and some of us won't make it." Suleiman wants to make it to Paradise, but he finds himself dwelling on more immediate, more universal concerns: Who will he become as a man? Has his character been shaped by his father? "How much of him is there in me? Can you become a man without becoming your father?" Suleiman's parents are defiant in different ways. His mother, in an alcoholic haze, told him that she defied her parents by holding hands in public with a young man in a neighborhood café. When her cousin betrayed her, she was forced into an immediate marriage with a stranger, his father, to wipe away the family shame.

Suleiman's relationship with his father grows more complex as the seemingly conventional businessman is gradually revealed to be an underground revolutionary who is campaigning for Libyan democracy.

Suleiman learns the price of such defiance firsthand when a beloved neighbor, Ustath Rashid, a brilliant scholar and his father's co-conspirator, is arrested and publicly pressured to reveal his accomplices.

Fascinated by televised interrogations of dissidents, Suleiman nonetheless comes to realize that Rashid, or even his own father, could be next. "I had heard it many times before that no one is ever beyond their reach, but to see them, to see how it can happen, how quickly, how there's no space to argue, to say no, made my belly swim," he says. It is a moment of revelation, beyond the lessons about good and evil learned from Mustafa, his old teacher. Insensible to the cause of her son's sudden distress, Suleiman's mother washes his face and fixes soup and tea, "as if I had the flu."

Not a book to resort to abstractions, *In the Country of Men* vividly depicts the hard choices that individuals—even children—must make when they find themselves living under a repressive regime.

Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood

By Marjane Satrapi

Like Hisham Matar, author of *In the Country of Men*, Iranian artist and writer Marjane Satrapi has created a coming-of-age saga that focuses on the importance of family and the struggle for identity in a revolutionary Muslim society. Satrapi's largely autobiographical narrative, a graphic novel in black and white titled *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, has as its backdrop the series of political and cultural upheavals that transformed Iran in the seventies and eighties: the overthrow of the shah, the rise of an Islamic theocracy, and the Iran-Iraq War.

Satrapi begins her story in 1980. She is ten years old, and in the first few frames of *Persepolis* we see her and her classmates in black headscarves, a newly mandated addition to their school uniforms. The text and images make it clear that this is a shocking change for an irrepressible girl raised in a well-to-do family that has embraced Western values.

"The year before, in 1979, we were in a French nonreligious school," she says, "where boys and girls were together." But bilingual schools were considered symbols of capitalism and decadence by Iran's new Islamist rulers. Teaching children of both sexes in the same institution was also frowned on. There would be many more adjustments to come.

The imaginative schoolgirl identifies with the storied Persian Empire of centuries past (Persepolis was the imperial capital), which she associates with a creativity and intellectual tolerance she finds totally lacking in revolutionary Iran. But despite her disdain for the new order, she feels the spirit of nationalism rising in her when she sees Iranian jets racing overhead on their way to do battle with forces invading from neighboring Iraq.

In her introduction to *Persepolis*, Satrapi sets out the goals for her work. She has aimed to tell a story packed with real people and real lives, she says, complaining that her beloved country, "this old and great civilization," is often portrayed in simplistic terms, mostly the black and white of "fundamentalism, fanaticism, and terrorism." In her own use of black and white, Satrapi tells a story rich with color that surmounts the "isms" that have come to define the Islamic Republic.

Persepolis has a wide following in the West, especially in the Iranian exile community. A film version was widely praised and won the Jury Prize at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival. It is no surprise that the Iranian authorities hated the book and the film, saying it "presented an unrealistic picture of the achievements of the glorious Islamic revolution." This view only hardened when Satrapi gave permission for some of her previously published graphic work to be used on *Spread Persepolis*, a German website that called attention to the controversial 2009 Iranian presidential election—in particular, the outraged street protests that followed the disputed vote count that gave Mahmoud Ahmadinejad a second term as president.

Satrapi's vow to tell the complex story of Iran is as relevant as ever; though it was written nearly a decade ago, *Persepolis* seems to comment on recent events in Iran such as the emergence of the Green movement and the death of political protestor Neda Agha-Soltan, recorded on a cell phone and viewed by millions around the world. The book even figured in the Arab Spring of 2011. When a television station in Tunisia aired the film version, controversy broke out over a scene that depicts God—throwing into stark relief new tensions between Islamists and secularists in that North African country.



House of Stone: A Memoir of Home, Family, and a Lost Middle East

By Anthony Shadid

An elegantly written memoir by an American journalist with insights into Islamic culture, *House of Stone* was transformed into a memorial in February 2012, when the author died days before publication. Just forty-three years old, he had apparently suffered a fatal asthma attack while reporting from Syria for the *New York Times*.

An Arab American born in Oklahoma City, Anthony Shadid was in some ways an outsider in the Middle East, yet he wrote with an insider's sensitivity gained from his extensive reporting in the region as well as his investigation of his family saga of immigration to the United States from Jedeidet Marjayoun, his ancestral home in southern Lebanon. "The Shadids, we were among the first to leave Marjayoun, joining others who fled, starting around 1894," he writes. Many more would follow, journeying from the Middle East to the plains of Middle America, where Shadid's childhood was shaped by the stories of his family's homeland.

Taking a year off from journalism in 2007, Shadid set out to rebuild his grandfather's abandoned stone house in Jedeidet Marjayoun. No one from his clan had lived in the south Lebanon village for more than forty years. Jedeidet Marjayoun was a predominantly Christian village at the turn of the twentieth century, and Shadid describes a "diverse but integrated tapestry" of Christians, Muslims, and Druze. The modern demographics of Jedeidet Marjayoun reflect those of Lebanon: predominantly Muslim, with a dwindling Christian minority. Shadid longs for what he calls the region's "more civilized past," and delves into why it has transformed "into a puzzle of political divisions." In Shadid's telling, it is a profound loss, not just of a place that "brought together religious communities" but of "the cosmopolitanism of a confident culture."

Shadid's perspective is that of a Christian Arab American, which, at first, may seem unusual for a book in a series focusing on Islamic culture. However, his viewpoint and his interpretation of the history of the Middle East sheds light on a richer past when Islamic culture comfortably accommodated a wide range of religious minorities. The chronic warfare and redrawing of political boundaries that have marked the last century and more of Middle Eastern history also transformed the Shadids' Lebanese village, their nation, and, ultimately, the region.

"In the time of the Levant there was freedom to savor the worlds of others. But borders, rendered with caprice, ended what had been," Shadid writes, underscoring this point with striking details about a market square that was the focus of village life. On Good Friday, Christian prayers would be broadcast from the speakers of the Muslim-owned restaurant on the square. One of the author's relatives, Hani Shadid, a Greek Orthodox Christian with a sweet singing voice, would return the favor. Hani would climb to the minaret of the local mosque and then "turn to Mecca, and begin to recite the Muslim call to prayer, touching each word with care." It is a remarkable scene, almost unimaginable today.

For the Oklahoma Shadids, the retelling of these events became family lore, recalled and repeated from generation to generation as examples of the best of times. "Here was Hani Shadid seeking God for all kinds," Shadid writes. His family embraced the memory, and "in other times, less peaceful, they would marvel at the Muslims' acceptance of a Christian man addressing their God as their intermediary."

Even though it takes on despair and loss, this memoir is often hilarious: Shadid's account of the rebuilding of his grandfather's house back in Lebanon is the story of a DIY project sometimes derailed by the cultural misunderstandings of a "type-A personality" Arab American. Shadid's hired painter is colorblind. His foreman is prone to tantrums, and the chief carpenter is "so utterly lacking in

punctuality that he measures time in seasons.” The house is nonetheless resurrected, with Shadid sustaining himself on “whiskey” and the town’s quirky camaraderie. But there is also foreboding: the reader knows what Shadid cannot. Even so, his death in Syria a few years after he completed his monument to family history is a tragedy whose coming he may have sensed. As his frustration mounts, Shadid writes, “I’m going to finish this house and I’ll end up never setting foot in it again.” Sadly, he seems to have foretold his fate.

Broken Verses

By Kamila Shamsie

Pakistani novelist Kamila Shamsie explores family, Islam, and politics in her fourth novel, *Broken Verses*. As an author, Shamsie’s major romance is with the word. It is a fundamental element of Islamic culture which is as old as the revealed word of the Qur’an, Islam’s holy text. Shamsie is devoted to the power of words and creates an intriguing narrative that weaves descriptions of her beloved city of Karachi in poetic imagery. “My ex called the other winter ‘autumn’ as we queue to hear dock boys play jazz fugues in velvet dark,” she writes about a night in Karachi, known in Pakistan as “the City of Lights.”

Shamsie also explores the limits of peaceful activism against violent repression, a theme that has been made more relevant as the Arab Spring progresses.

Set in Karachi, *Broken Verses* is a murder mystery wrapped in a family drama. Its main character, Aasmaani, is bright and politically aware, though something of an underachiever, whose latest job is writing copy for an entertainment show on a new private TV channel. “Sometimes I feel like I’ve spent my whole life missing mama,” thirty-year-old Aasmaani laments as she struggles to make sense of her life. She is immersed in grief and anger over the loss of her mother, a feminist activist who disappeared more than a decade ago, and her mother’s lover, a revolutionary writer known simply as “The Poet” who was

brutally murdered two years earlier by government thugs as he prepared to publish a politically explosive volume of poetry.

Aasmaani observes that “we knew that in our refusal to fight for language with bombs or lies lay our defeat.” Yet language, particularly poetry, is also a powerful weapon. The Poet’s writings are a danger to the state because “he tells the truth” and holds society responsible for actions that limit freedom—not just Pakistan’s authoritarian leaders. Aasmaani’s mother, Samina Akram, a fearless advocate for women’s rights, also used words as weapons when new laws reducing women’s status were enacted “in the name of Islam.”

The Poet and Akram are a formidable political couple. But after the Poet is murdered, Akram disappears. Her daughter, Aasmaani, assumes she had been abandoned as her mother had done so often before choosing the political over the personal. Shamsie thus allows us to understand the human lives and experiences that surround recent voices of tolerance, pluralism, and change in Pakistan being silenced by violence. In *Broken Verses*, Shamsie uses a popular genre, the mystery novel, to make a point that resonates as the Arab Spring movement enters its third year—that there may be limits to the power of peaceful activism to triumph over violent repression.

Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood

By Fatima Mernissi

Fatima Mernissi, now a university sociologist in Morocco, grew up in a harem. More exactly, she shuttled between two traditional harems. Growing up in an urban household in Fez, she also frequently visited her maternal grandmother, Yasmina, who lived in a rural farm community that was also a harem. In this finely drawn memoir of a Moroccan childhood, Mernissi examines the role of women in a conservative Muslim society.



The harems of the Morocco of the 1940s were by no means the exotic, sexualized places of Western writers' fantasies. More exactly, they were extended-family households with separate quarters where women and children resided. No males except close relatives were allowed. Mernissi was a child of privilege, a deeply religious girl, a female member of a conservative Muslim family.

Mernissi writes from the perspective of her younger self, in the voice of a girl pondering a system defined by what she calls "frontiers." This headstrong girl chafed against the restrictions of her culture.

"A harem had to do with men and women—that was one fact," she writes while grappling with definitions. "It also had to do with a house, walls, and the street—that was another fact. All of this was quite simple and easy to visualize: put four walls in the midst of the streets, and you have a house. Then put the women in the house and let the men go out. You have a harem."

Her grandmother explains that a harem's purpose is much more complex. The point is for women to internalize the rules until the locked doors become unnecessary. Her mother expands on the real motives for keeping women behind closed doors: "Running around the planet is what makes the brain race, and to put our brains to sleep is the idea behind the locks and the walls." She added that the heart of the matter was a more important restriction for the women of the household: "to prevent them from becoming too smart." Certainly, in Mernissi's case, it didn't work. And even the illiterate women of the household demonstrate an acute understanding of their society and the world. Despite the restrictions on physical mobility, these boisterous female residents can go anywhere their imaginations can take them. Storytelling and secret rebellions are a key part of the story. Mernissi vividly describes afternoons spent performing costumed plays and giving dramatic readings. When the men are away, the women turn on a forbidden radio and listen to the latest songs and consider the news of the day.

The author ultimately condemns the harem system, but in the gentlest possible way. Clearly, there are treasured memories from a childhood steeped in the warm and generous spirit of the self-aware women who raised her.

Mernissi eventually escaped the restrictions as Morocco's conservative society began to change. She won a scholarship to the Sorbonne in Paris and earned a doctorate in sociology from Brandeis University in the United States. Today she is both a leading advocate for women's rights and an Islamic scholar; her early education was in religious schools. She uses the Qur'an to make her case that Islam provides for the liberation of women but has been subverted by men. "Even the most fervent extremist never argues that women are inferior," she writes in another work. "Muslim women are raised with a strong sense of equality."

The colorful characters in the households of *Dreams of Trespass* demonstrate that the female members of Mernissi's extended family had a sharply defined sense that they were indeed the equal of any man.



Deborah Amos's reports can be heard on NPR's award-winning *Morning Edition*, *All Things Considered*, and *Weekend Edition*. Amos joined NPR in 1977, first as a director and then a producer for *Weekend All Things Considered*. Amos joined ABC News in 1993 and spent a decade in television, reporting for ABC's *Nightline* and *World News Tonight* and the PBS programs *NOW with Bill Moyers* and *Frontline*. Upon returning to NPR, Amos took up the post of foreign correspondent in Amman, Jordan, and then London Bureau Chief. Amos won widespread recognition for her coverage of the Gulf War in 1991. A year later, she published *Lines in the Sand: Desert Storm and the Remaking of the Arab World* (Simon and Schuster, 1992). She is a former Nieman Fellow at Harvard University, has taught journalism at Princeton University, and is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. Her latest book is *Eclipse of the Sunnis: Power, Exile, and Upheaval in the Middle East* (PublicAffairs, 2010). She lives in New York City.

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Cover: Fifteenth-century map by Piri Reis of the coastline of Andalusia and the city of Granada.
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